

What is Social Research?

Social research is the scientific study of society. More specifically, social research examines a society's attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, trends, stratifications and rules. The scope of social research can be small or large, ranging from the self or a single individual to spanning an entire race or country. Popular topics of social research include poverty, racism, class issues, sexuality, voting behavior, gender constructs, policing and criminal behavior.

Social research determines the relationship between one or more variables. For example, sex and income level are variables. Social scientists will look for underlying concepts and cause-and-effect relationships of a social issue. Before even beginning research, scientists must formulate a research question. For example, a researcher might ask if there is a relationship between a person's sex and his or her income level. Do men have higher incomes than women? Are women most likely to be poor?

A third variable, race, can be added to the question. Then the social scientist can pose a research question: Does race and sex affect a person's income level? Social scientists will then collect data, organize and analyze information and create a report of their findings. People conducting social research must also consider ethics, biases and the reliability and validity of the research they're conducting. They must decide which form of sampling to use, how to measure information, how to analyze data and present their findings.

Research can be conducted using surveys, reports, observation, questionnaires, focus groups, historical accounts, personal diaries and census statistics. There are two types of research qualitative research and quantitative research. Qualitative research is inductive, meaning the researcher creates hypotheses and abstractions from collected data. Most data is collected via words or pictures and mostly from people. Researchers are interested in how people make sense of their lives and in the research process itself.

Quantitative research is the complete opposite and most often involves numbers and set data. Quantitative data is efficient but focuses only on the end result, not the process itself, as qualitative research does. Quantitative data is precise and is often the result of surveys or questionnaires.

Even though social research is most often conducted by social scientists or sociologists, it is an interdisciplinary study crossing into subjects like criminology, the study of crime; politics, the study of power; economics, the study of money and business; psychology, study of the mind; philosophy, study of beliefs and morals; and anthropology, the study of culture.